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Introduction to special symposium: Ivan Vladislavić, writing visual culture, and the globalization of a South African “artworld”

A pre-proof draft of the introduction, co-written with Katie Reid (Sussex) for a symposium published in issue 52:1 of the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*. Available online here: <http://journals.sagepub.com/toc/jcla/52/1>

Ivan Vladislavić has played various roles, and occupied a range of institutional spaces, in the development of contemporary South African literary culture. In the 1980s, as fiction and social studies editor for Ravan Press and as assistant editor for the groundbreaking magazine *Staffrider*, Vladislavić was involved in the work of visual artists and photographers, and with the editing and publication of writers, black and white, who were openly hostile to the apartheid state. Through the late 1980s and to date, his reputation has grown, nationally and internationally, as a preeminent writer of post-apartheid South Africa. Throughout this period Vladislavić has worked with both prominent and new writers across a range of genres as a highly sought after freelance editor, as well as with architects, urbanists, photographers, and artists on projects that typically seek to reframe the ways in which everyday life in South Africa, particularly the restless transformations of the urban milieu of Johannesburg which constitutes his home and workplace, is perceived, imagined, and lived.

This unique mode of working addresses the “entanglement” of colonial and apartheid ways of seeing with emergent and often contingent modes of being, and was taken to exemplify “writing the ‘now’ in South Africa” by Sarah Nuttall in her influential 2004 essay. More recently, however, Nuttall has criticized Vladislavić for envisioning the city in writing that is “at times, racially inflected and nostalgic” (2009: 89), and more recently still has refocused her critique in terms of what she describes as a “generational aporia” and

subsequent lack of cross-racial friendship (2012: 355). Despite this emergent line of critique, in the introduction to *Marginal Spaces: Reading Ivan Vladislavić*, Gerald Gaylard (2011: 11) argues that Vladislavić assumes a leading role in the “worlding” of a specifically South African literary aesthetic. This symposium develops these observations by examining Vladislavić’s work in fashioning and facilitating new kinds of creative expression in South Africa. It takes as a central problematic the conditions and possibilities of artistic and immaterial labour as these are performed through Vladislavić’s editorial interventions and interdisciplinary “joint projects” (cf. Vladislavić and Naudé, 2014), and as they are thematized in his fictional output through “performative avatars” (Gaylard, 2011), for example figures such as the visual artist Simeon Majara in *The Exploded View* (2004a), the visually and art-historically literate flâneur figure, “Vlad”, of *Portrait with Keys*, and the photographer Neville Lister in *Double Negative* (2010).

Orientated around Vladislavić’s sustained engagement with ways of seeing, visual culture, and the visual arts in particular, the contributions to this symposium illustrate Vladislavić’s significance in the intersecting networks of the South African “literary” and “artistic” fields (Bourdieu, 1993). A key motif that runs through the articles is the importance of thinking about Vladislavić’s work in two senses of the word: the reflexive concern of his own fictional output to thematize visual culture, art, and artists on the one hand, and his professional work as an editor within these fields and with these figures, on the other. The picture that emerges is one where Vladislavić’s “work” constellates what Howard Becker (1982) termed an “art world”, a network of cultural producers whose cooperative activity legitimates its aesthetic value. Identifying primarily as a writer — “I’m a writer”, his semi-fictional narrator states straightforwardly in *Portrait with Keys* (2006: 26) — yet also working as a highly sought-after editor, Vladislavić’s *métier* is closely aligned with the kind of consecratory function Bourdieu (1996: 225) traces in more traditional intermediaries in the

literary field, such as critics or publishers. Artistic value and symbolic capital are generated in the resulting intersection between the modes of aesthetic labour, legitimacy, and agency that Vladislavić thematizes in and through his work. This is becoming increasingly visible with the international symbolic successes of recent art/book projects Vladislavić has been involved with. These include: the co-published box set photobook and novel *TJ/Double Negative* (2010), a joint project between Vladislavić and the South African photographer David Goldblatt which won the Kraszna-Krausz Photography Book Award in 2011 (as a standalone novel, *Double Negative* won the University of Johannesburg Creative Writing Prize 2010/11); and *Ponte City* by South African Mikhael Subotzky and British photographer Patrick Waterhouse, a photobook Vladislavić contributed to as editor and writer, which won the Deutsche-Börse Photography Prize in 2014. In 2015, Vladislavić's visibility as a "world writer" was marked by a Windham-Campbell Literature Prize at Yale University, a prestigious "global English-language award" of \$150,000 recognizing "literary achievement", aiming to "provide writers with the opportunity to focus on their work independent of financial concerns" (Windham-Campbell website).¹

As a writer and editor who chooses to work cooperatively with visual artists, and as a skilled, reflexive art critic and essayist, Vladislavić blurs the conventional distinctions between the Bourdieusian fields of literary and artistic production. In doing so he also reconfigures Becker's "art world". Viewed on these terms, the celebrated wordliness of Vladislavić's writing lies not only in its acutely focused observational quality — giving life to the minutiae and composite materials of South African culture (see, for example, S. Graham, 2006). It is also marked by a playful interdiscursivity that transmutes the semiotics of South Africa's visual culture in and through the world of books (Murray, 2008), introducing it to new, international audiences and markets through the more mobile form. In deluxe edition

¹ See "About: History and Mission" at <http://windhamcampbell.org/history-mission>.

art books which function as art-objects, and in his stand-alone creative texts in which visual culture is often playfully encoded, Vladislavić's work therefore contributes to what might be called a South African *artworld*: shifting localities of reception, enabling cosmopolitan modes of identification and evaluation, circumventing rather than being determined by the exigencies of book publishing in South Africa and abroad (see, for example, Van der Vlies, 2012; Law-Viljoen, 2012).

Sean O'Toole opens the symposium by providing a comprehensive overview of Vladislavić's critical and creative engagement with art — an engagement that is present from the very outset of his literary career with his debut book *Missing Persons* (1989), yet which to date has only been considered at any length in academic criticism by Sally-Anne Murray (2008) and Graham Riach (2015). O'Toole responds to this lacuna by shedding light on Vladislavić's involvement with Possession Arts, a neo-Dadaist collective of avant-garde artists living in Yeoville, Johannesburg (members included Joachim Schönfeldt, Jeff Lok and Chas Unwin, all close associates of Vladislavić), as well as his attendance in 1982 at *documenta 7*, an important global exhibition of contemporary art held every five years in Kassel, Germany. These formative experiences set the scene for his peripheral — yet in many ways instrumental — involvement in the visual arts, creatively as well as critically, in subsequent years, including: the early genesis of his novel *The Exploded View* (2004a), a text produced as a result of an art project initiated by Schönfeldt; his creative refraction of the career of world-renowned photographer David Goldblatt in the novel *Double Negative* (2010) — the novel published as a counterpart to Goldblatt's Johannesburg photographs, *TJ/Double Negative* (2010); and his recent contributions (as editor) to photographer Mikhael Subotzky's book *Retinal Shift* (2012), and (as editor and writer) to Subotzky's own joint-project with Patrick Waterhouse, *Ponte City* (2014). Rather than simply forming an anecdotal aspect of his output as a writer, it is O'Toole's contention that his literary corpus functions as

a uniquely creative mode of art criticism — an uncommon criticism — contributing towards a revived critical understanding of contemporary South African visual art practice from the mid-1970s onwards.

Sue Marais' article extends this discussion through a detailed examination of what Andries Oliphant (2004b: 19) calls the "reverse [...] ekphrasis" of *The Exploded View* (2004a). The origins of this "four-part novel" (Gaylard, 2006: 67) are fictional responses to a series of embossed images by the Johannesburg artist, Joachim Schönfeldt, which appeared alongside those images in *The Model Men* exhibition, curated by Andries Oliphant at the University of Witwatersrand Art Galleries, August-September 2004. Though Vladislavić maintains that the links between Schönfeldt's images and his own series of interconnected stories are understated, Marais argues that certain motifs deriving from Schönfeldt's artworks have been retained, in modified form, in *The Exploded View*.

Vladislavić has commented that "[t]he notion of authenticity is central to Schönfeldt's images, which have a perplexingly ambiguous status as highly crafted mass-produced objects", and admitted that this is no less true of his own text: "[a]uthenticity [...] became a concern in *The Exploded View*" (2004b: 11). Questions of authenticity are especially foregrounded in the story (or "part", if we heed Vladislavić's description) "Curiouser", which features a mixed-media installation artist named Simeon Majara, a cipher for post-apartheid artistic celebrity who reappears in the novel *Double Negative* (2010), tellingly as the subject of art criticism. In Marais' reading, Majara's deconstructive and reconstructive modus operandus raises uncomfortable questions regarding artistic originality and integrity, since his installations are premised either on the exploitation of cheaply obtained and perhaps contraband African curios, or on a ludic simulation of scenes of violence. Whilst the fictional Majara's exhibition entitled *Curiouser* or "Curio-user" appears to resonate most obviously with Schönfeldt's images of mystical three-headed

female creatures, Marais teases out the relationship between the local and global that provides the reception context that Vladislavić seeks to refract through this part of the text. Focusing on the implications of Vladislavić's rendering of Majara's *Genocide* series, Marais argues that "Genocide III", the "Nyanza Shrouds" (a response to the Rwandan genocide of 1994), has a powerful but profoundly ambivalent impact on the reader (or surrogate "viewer") despite the fact that Vladislavić is describing an imaginary artwork by a fictional artist.

Both the installation and the narrative account reflexively interrogate artistic and fictional representations of atrocity, together with the art world's and reading public's consumption of such spectacle. Moreover, "Nyanza Shrouds" sets up an uncanny conversation with the Chilean-born artist Alfredo Jaar's ongoing *Rwandan Project*, part of which — 'The Eyes of Gutete Emerita' — was exhibited at the second Johannesburg Biennale in 1997. The similarity between Jaar and Majara's names suggests a deliberately teasing cross-reference, given Vladislavić's imbrication in the South African art world and his simultaneous oblique critique of its post-apartheid globalization. Given this context, Marais concludes by noting that "Curiouser" engages intertextually with what Majara terms "the economies of repetition" (2004a: 105) in the text, and what Vladislavić himself has recently referred to as "the surprisingly enabling anxiety of influence" (Van Schalkwyk, 2014), specifically in the context of artistic and fictional representations of genocide. *The Exploded View* might therefore be seen as a paradigmatic example of what James Graham, in his article for the symposium, terms the "Quiet Editor" at his work: where writing about visual art — Vladislavić's reverse ekphrasis — functions as both pastiche and creative editing simultaneously; and where, just as the work of editing becomes another kind of writing, the literary text becomes the uncanny double not just of an artwork, but of art *work* in a more literal sense.

Another kind of immaterial labour that is incorporated within Vladislavić's creative and critical engagement with visual culture is what Jane Poyner refers to as Vladislavić's "memory-work" in her discussion of his "fictionalized memoir" *Portrait with Keys* (2006). A creative non-fiction, *Portrait* is a collection of 138 short text pieces, many of which were written for and first published in other contexts, and in response to the work of visual artists. Drawing attention to this aspect of *Portrait*'s genesis, Poyner suggests that it is not only a very writerly text, one that is self-conscious of its own construction, but that it is also self-consciously visual: in its rendering of Egoli, "the city of gold", the images that Vladislavić depicts assume a painterly or photographic quality. Drawing on insights from art historian Annie Coombes' book, *History After Apartheid: Visual Culture and Public Memory in a Democratic South Africa* (2003), and on Walter Benjamin's notion that the photographic image brings past and present to bear upon each other to critical effect, "dialectics at a standstill" (1999: 463), Poyner argues that *Portrait*, through its reflexive portrayal of visual culture, rehabilitates Johannesburg's potentially alienating urban environment. "Seeing and then seeing again" (2006: 88) is the process named by Vladislavić by which, Poyner argues, the author intervenes in the institutionalised forms and structures of "memory-work" to envision acts of cultural rehabilitation, which in turn constitute both artistic and ideological revisions of everyday visual culture.

The revisionary impetus for what O'Toole here argues to be Vladislavić's "uncommon criticism" is a sympathetic yet still critical means of exploring the continuing racial lines along which the city is drawn (motifs of walls and boundaries proliferate to this end), as well as his own sense of responsibility and accountability as a white South African writer for South Africa's past. Even if, in *Portrait*, Johannesburg is dismissed by Vlad and his friend Chas as "no more than a mnemonic" (2006: 33), through memory-work the author Vladislavić and his characterisation "Vlad" address their own sense of place as white men

within the changing urban environment, as well as the processes of social transformation necessary to envisioning a revitalized “new South Africa”. Poyner’s reading of *Portrait* as a travelogue which inverts the genre of Euroimperial travel writing famously theorized by Mary Louise Pratt (1992), lays bare Vladislavić’s presentation of the acts of looking at and consuming visual culture in the context of the protean, “postcolonial” city and state.

Vladislavić refracts the South African art world in his own fictions as well as the creative work that issues from his various “joint projects” which are typically urban in subject and interdiscursive in their frames of reference. He also refracts this art world in the manner of his working practices, which are cooperative and dialogic in ethos. James Graham’s article considers Vladislavić as a key node in Becker’s (1982: 304) “cooperative network” of an “art world”. Discussing the sociological and literary significance of Vladislavić’s “double life” as both a writer and editor who has worked extensively with as well as on visual art and artists, he argues that Vladislavić’s key contribution to South African visual and literary culture is to be found in the ongoing reflexive exploration of the tensions between what he describes as the “technical” versus the “creative” (quoted in Krog, 2006: 94–95) dimensions of his craft. Graham proposes that the “Quiet Editor”, as Vladislavić has been described by one of the people he has edited (Couzens, 2006), is a new kind of writer, and editing, in the world of his fiction, is figured as a new kind of writing. Graham’s article begins by discussing examples drawn from the range of Vladislavić’s editorial interventions and joint projects. The slippages between editing and writing that are traced in the article are in the first instance born of socio-economic necessity, what the French literary sociologist Bernard Lahire has called “the double life of the writer” (in Richman, 2010: 440). Yet in Vladislavić’s work with, but also his reworking of other literary and artistic forms and figures, the sociological and psychological doubling that Lahire identifies in his empirical investigation into writers’ habitus is transformed into a new kind of creative praxis. This is a

mode of immaterial labour that is underpinned by a cooperative ethos more typically to be found in the visual arts networks that Sean O'Toole discusses in his contribution, than it is within the field of literary production as it has more traditionally been conceptualized.

Graham concludes by suggesting that Vladislavić's work as the "Quiet Editor" plays an instrumental role in the "worlding" of South African artistic and literary production. In particular, the joint projects in which he is involved often bring together internationally renowned as well as lesser-known writers, photographers, and artists, and effect canny cross-subsidizations of symbolic capital. Vladislavić has recently described this form of co-production as "the bonded autonomy of a joint project" (Vladislavić and Naudé, 2014). Graham argues that this particular form of immaterial labour enables the co-producing participants to "play the game" of positioning themselves in relation to a global literary marketplace as described by Sarah Brouillette (2007), whilst at the same time retaining forms of autonomy and authenticity that she argues are typically sacrificed in postcolonial literary production.

Vladislavić has rejected the label of "post-apartheid writer" as a marketing category that encourages false distinctions (2010, personal communication with Reid; see also Thurman, 2011). The articles included in this symposium implicitly take up this observation and explore how Vladislavić's writing reflexively interrogates a context of production — the visual culture of South Africa — in ways that insist on a continued examination of post-apartheid structures and spaces under conditions of neoliberal globalization. In this context, Vladislavić's work on, but also with, art and artists, plays both an enabling and a critical role. Through the cooperative craft of the "Quiet Editor" he fosters what Graham Riach calls a "community of practice", a way of "working collectively that upholds the individual importance of each contributing artist, while making something greater than the sum of its parts" (2015: 93). The generative links with this broader collective practice can be traced,

however obliquely they appear, in Vladislavić's writing which, through playful strategies of "seeing and seeing again" resists the more "romantic" (Vladislavić and Naudé, 2014) conception of the lone writer struggling for recognition in a globalized literary market. The confluence of this mode of writing and method of working critiques the impact of globalization on everyday life in South Africa, whilst at the same time playing an increasingly important role in the international recognition of South African cultural production. This symposium therefore contributes to a widening conception and appreciation of Vladislavić's critical role in the development of a global South African "artworld" today.

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